Dynamic Emotional Narratives and Vocal Expression: Comment on "An Integrative Review of the Enjoyment of Sadness Associated with Music" by Eerola et al.

Dynamic Emotional Narratives and Vocal Expression:
Response to "An Integrative Review of the
Enjoyment of Sadness Associated with Music"

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Eerola and colleagues' fascinating and timely paper [1] brings to the forefront some of the complexities and difficulties in understanding the powerful role of music in human behaviour. The authors take what might seem a trivial paradox and explore it in serious depth through some of the latest research and thinking in this area. In doing so, they confirm the important roles of familiarity, prediction and empathy in emotional responses to music as well as the extent to which music can be conceived of as a social signal. Overall, the paper brings us closer to understanding how feelings of sadness might be shared, experienced and released in an intimate way through music.

Arising from their review, the authors provide an insightful model for further research (Fig. 1) and also identify that, at times, the concept of sadness in relation to music has been an "ill-defined problem" (p 39). The authors conclude by setting out some aims and challenges for future investigation in this area, leading me to five additional proposals. (1) Going forward, music-related emotions should be considered as **dynamic** more often than static, e.g. [2]. Music has the capacity to take us to heights of anguish and despair and then resolve into calmness and peace within the space of just a few bars. This kind of dynamic emotional narrative potentially allows an intense musical experience to bring therapeutic emotional release and resolution, with a complexity that goes beyond static feelings of enjoyment or sadness. (2) The field of **music analysis** needs to enter the discussion. Stylistic musical conventions have developed over centuries to represent and induce emotions, from beautiful, heart-wrenching suspensions and dissonances to the sometimes clichéd, dramatic use of dynamics, rubato and particular orchestration techniques [3]. In addition, the advent of film music leads to long-term association of such stylistic conventions with particular moods or states of tension [4], important to consider when conducting experimental research with adult participants. (3) **Vocal expression** forms a central position in human musical behaviour and a deeper understanding of the physical, emotional, communicative aspects of such expression warrants further attention. The nuances of timbre, timing and intensity that constitute an expressive vocal gesture are comparable to expressive musical performances or indeed compositional techniques and are likely to have a strong influence on our emotional responses to music [5]. (4) Going forward, a more precise scientific distinction needs to be made between a) **appreciating** and enjoying music that can be described as sad (such as the blues or a requiem), b) **associating** music with a personal sad memory, c) feeling sad and **selecting** music to match our mood and d) experiencing **induced sadness** from music. While these different types of music-related sadness are discussed in depth by Eerola and colleagues [1] future experimental research would benefit from their clearer distinction. (5) Finally, the

recent advent (in evolutionary terms) of personally curated music listening experiences via recordings and playlists, might be considered a **new technology** that simply builds on more fundamental, live forms of musical expression or shared music-making. Particular features of this new technology are the possibilities of extensive solo listening experiences, along with both repetition *ad infinitum* and constant variety, often leading to an intimate knowledge of and relationship with a large repertoire of music [6].

One of the benefits of future research in this area, perhaps especially in the areas of dynamic emotional narratives and vocal expression, will be to increase our understanding of the potential role of positive, shared musical experiences in learning and in therapy [7-10]. Teenagers in particular have a strong affinity with the emotional complexities of preferred music, personal identity and social bonding, as they go through key developmental stages [11]. Infants also respond to the emotional qualities of music in a powerful way, paying close attention to narrative [12], while it is interesting to note that lullabies often have melancholy lyrics, perhaps as an expressive outlet for the parent while soothing for the infant, e.g. [13]. Such research may also contribute to our understanding of more general psychological concepts such as the role of negative bias in human cognition [14], how prediction, affect and empathy may interrelate [15,16] or indeed the emerging field of positive psychology [17]. The current review and model of the processes involved in the enjoyment of sad music [1] thus offers an extremely valuable framework for future thinking and research.

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